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HOW KAMEAH FELL - HASKELL

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LECTURE XXX.

HOW KAWEAH FELL.

Burnette G. Haskell.

(Reprinted from the *Examiner*, November 29, 1891, with some condensation.)

Kaweah Colony has failed.

Those who had believed that they would be the burglars of Paradise, that they would reach upon this earth to the kingdom of heaven, have abandoned their purpose and are routed and disorganized, babbling many tongues. "And so the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth; and they left off to build the city."

The full history of this Tower of Babel may not be condensed within these limits, and perhaps also the time is not yet ripe for a thoroughly wise and critical survey of the whole experiment, yet some facts, heretofore concealed, now in honor should be stated, and even now lessons may be drawn from this tale of work and idleness, noble purpose and weakly practice, joy, faith, sorrow, and disaster—all so human and so true—that may enlighten or warn, as well as interest, the people of these United States. For this experiment was purposeful, and had it won it would have set its seal upon the future of this country, and perhaps its failure as well may count in some way as affecting the destiny of events. "Did we think victory great? So it is, but now since it can not be helped, methinks that death and dismay are also great."

Having been identified with Kaweah from the first, I know its plans and purpose and why and when and where it failed. It was one of the hopes of my life. And seeing it now, lying dead before me, knowing that its own hands assisted in strangling it, knowing that the guilt of its death rests upon nearly all of its members, myself far from being excepted, the pen that writes the epitaph also pencils as well "peccavi."

I look out of the window of my mountain cabin and the sky is full of winter storm. I hardly know how to begin to tell you the story.

HOW THE COLONY STARTED.

My attention was turned to the labor question in 1882. I participated in most of its phases until 1885, when, in company with a number of others who had also dipped into the study of political economy, we arrived at what was conceived to be a solution of the problem of poverty and wealth, the inequalities of destiny and fortune, and had found, we believed, a road to human happiness.

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The labor movement is profoundly impressed with the spirit of the age. Whether it knows it or not, the bugle of evolution has given the guide to every file of its broadening and marching flank that is sweeping around the corner of the future on to the broad plains of coming democracy; and we, its dreamers, were but a skirmish line of the main body. Though swept away, there are divisions and divisions behind. If we fell from the ambush perhaps this salutation that we make to death may warn the next thin line of the rifle pits that bar this way and teach them another road to the open fields. We were not fit to survive, and we died. But there is no bribe money in our pockets, and beaten and ragged as we are, we are not ashamed.

We were of the opinion—as are two millions of American farmers and mechanics today—that the abolition of poverty, if accomplished, meant the happiness of the people. When answered that “human nature” itself was the gate that shut out heaven, we retorted, in our pride, that this selfish nature was but the product of conditions, and that when these were altered human disposition would change. We believed our species sufficiently civilized to change environment at once, readapt ourselves without delay to new forces and conquer the subtle spell of heredity in one generation.

But how were we going to abolish poverty? We were but a score or so, poorly equipped with money, but having clear-cut convictions that will bear the closest theoretical attack.

We knew that wealth was produced by the application of human labor to the raw material provided by nature. We had the labor; we must get the land; this to abolish the landlord tax on tools and soil. But we must, in inaugurating production, choose some product which from its natural scarcity would command a market; we must find a locality where this market was at our doors, otherwise our surplus labor would fall into the purse of the transportation lords; we must provide our own medium of exchange, so as to avoid the interest tax. We must work co-operatively to escape profit and to enforce the necessity and beauty of human brotherhood. Thus founded, our State, however small at first, would grow in strength and loveliness until all men should heed, and the whole world should follow our guidons in one resistless advance.

This was the purpose for which Kaweah was founded, and upon which it was carried out. It never was a private money-making scheme nor a mere project for creating individual homes, but always had this quasi public character. It was for propaganda, and not for pelf, that it existed. I know that there are tales afloat of “fortunes gulled from the credulous public,” and so forth, but these are idle and silly lies. Officers and members alike of Kaweah are suffering today for the bare necessities of life. The final balance sheet of the Treasurer [published by Mr. Haskell] tells what money was received and where it went.

The fates seemed to smile upon the enterprise at first. A location was found. On the Sierra slopes of the western borders of Tulare county, beneath the shadow of Mount Whitney, grew a vast body of timber, some of it of giant growth, but the largest portion being of merchantable pine, fir, and redwood. It had been offered to the people by the United States for years, but remained unentered. The lumber monopolists of that section had surveyed and pronounced it "inaccessible," it being nearly two miles high, crowning an abrupt range to which it was believed impossible to build a road. But the great San Joaquin valley needed this timber and would be its natural market. Its treeless plains were being made into orchard homes and lumber was requisite as much as water for the soil. A vast population, ever growing, would during this generation occupy these plains and look to these forests for their natural wood supply. It could be teamed to the valley if but a road could be built. This forest lies at the headwaters of the north fork of the Kaweah river.

Our people heard of it; some of them visited and surveyed and reported the facts; their eyes sharpened by faith had seen a way to build the road. The matter was discussed and at last decided. That road should be built to the forest if human labor could do it. We located the land—land which, remember, had been declared worthless and inaccessible—and filed our claims properly at the land office. Forty-three people went down from San Francisco to Visalia on the same day and made entries.

x We purposed, after building our road, to produce lumber ourselves and to sell it to the farmers in the valley at cost. But having our own banking system, the time check, for which alone we intended to sell, we calculated that the very fact of our notes having a greater purchasing power for this staple article, lumber, would give them a premium over coin throughout the whole valley. The farmer having been taught thus their value, would receive them thereafter for his labor and food, and through their use we planned that the people themselves should build a canal through the center of the valley along the San Joaquin to tide-water, owned by the ones who built it. This successfully accomplished, we hoped that the people would have learned from experience the way out from the exactions of monopoly, and that step would follow until we should have established justice and abolished alike the tramp and millionaire.

This was our plan. And while accomplishing it we meant to create amid the hills an ideal commonwealth, the Fraternal Republic of which the world will always dream.

Visalia is a curious town, but probably not more so than any other country place. The advent of so many people filing upon "worthless" land aroused suspicion at once. The story went abroad that the Southern Pacific was behind the move. A protest naturally went to Washington. The entries were suspended on mere suspicion and kept so for five years. But relying upon

the faith of the Government so often pledged to protect the actual settler, the little band went to work to make their road. They issued a pamphlet explaining their views, asking recruits and money. From first to last about five hundred others joined them, some from almost every State in the Union, and many from countries of Europe. This list of membership itself is a curious study. It is the United States in microcosm; among the members are old and young, rich and poor, wise and foolish, educated and ignorant, worker and professional man, united only by the common interest in Kaweah. There were temperance men and their opposites, churchmen and agnostics, free-thinkers, Darwinists, and spiritualists, bad poets and good, musicians, artists, prophets, and priests. There were dress-reform cranks and phonetic spelling fanatics, word-purists and vegetarians. It was a mad, mad world, and being so small its madness was the more visible; but in its delirium it did some noble work, and perhaps—perhaps it was not quite a failure after all.

Thus much generally of the people. Let me now speak of the location.

The canyon of the North Fork is more than an ordinarily beautiful place. The climate is agreeable, the soil productive, the scenery exquisitely lovely. To follow the road up to the Pines is to take a journey connected with which there is a singular charm. Arriving at the summit of the pine ridge one crosses into the forest a "saddle" not wider than fifty yards, on each side of which is a sheer descent of thousands of feet; one slope is that of East Branch canyon, the other that of the Marble Fork, where its fourteen falls tumble in weird beauty to unmeasured chasms below.

From here to the west one can look over the tops of mountains far out into the San Joaquin valley; to the east the glacial peaks of Tyndall and Whitney pierce the skies. You are above the clouds and can see the storms raging beneath you.

By a detour north of some miles over a rough and difficult trail one can cross the Marble Fork and enter upon the plateau from whence rise the monster stems of the giant forest. This grove is of primeval grandeur; trees in diameter from eighteen to thirty-five feet and in height from two to three hundred, and so many of them that the sense of their size is lost in their number. Throughout the forest one remarks a solemn silence almost deathly in its quiet. It is a vast solitude without a sign of bird or animal life. Magnificent glades covered with rich grass, the sites of ancient lakes, are interspersed here and there, and in the center of each a bursting spring, from which wanders, like the Meander, a babbling brook.

Above and beyond the forest and the timber line are the forty Sierra lakes, unsounded and of amethyst hue, so deep are they, the sources of the rivers that drain their waters to the fertile Italian valley below.

Mountains of marble, quarries of lime, and mines of many metals were among the resources of the locality. They waited only for the hand of well-directed labor to make them sources of progress, wealth, and civilization.

But it was impossible to utilize this wealth without first building the road. This stupendous work, for such it was, was begun October 8, 1886, by Captain Antony W. Larsen, Horace T. Taylor, John Zobrist, Thomas Markusen, Martin Schneider, and Charles F. Keller, Mrs. Taylor and Mrs. Keller cooking for the camp. It was finished, entering the pines in June, 1890, nearly four years later. It is eighteen miles long, winding around hill and through canyon to attain the elevation, 8,000 feet, on a steady, noble grade of eight feet to the hundred, although on an air line the distance to be gained does not exceed three miles. An average of twenty men worked at the task continuously until done, and without proper tools, powder, or other appliances. At no time was there a dollar ahead in the treasury of the company, and it was literally a struggle from hand to mouth. The task was engineered mainly by H. T. Taylor, whose jovial nature, persistent drive, unbounded faith, and practical knowledge alone made the task possible of accomplishment. To have built this road by contract would have cost not less than \$8,000 per mile, or, say, \$150,000 at the least. The colony collected from all sources less than \$50,000 cash, and owes its members for this labor about \$150,000 in time checks.

The great majority of the colonists, I am fully persuaded, joined Kaweah to escape the grind and worry of the outside world, to secure social advantages and harmonious surroundings, and to realize the ideal of a fraternal and happy life. That they failed to have these things is their fault, and theirs alone. The present population is about fifty. It has been as high as 200, and altogether probably 300 of the members have at various times visited or resided upon the grounds. They must, therefore, constitute a fair average of the whole membership, and it will not be unjust to judge of all from their conduct and experience.

Until last December all of the houses were tents. The tent town of Advance was the home of the families from April, 1887, until December, 1889; the town of Kaweah, then established six miles farther down the canyon, was built of rough lumber and tenting combined. Some of the dwellings were mere hovels and some were furnished and decorated with considerable taste. William Christie, the treasurer, lived with his family in a tent that was open, top and sides, to wind and weather; many of the unmarried workers slept for months in the hay piled in an open barn.

Various attempts were made to organize a band and an orchestra, but the membership changed so often that nothing permanent resulted.

A Sunday school and church existed for a while, but finally died.

Literary and scientific classes were started but petered out from lack of interest.

A "Home Circle" that met every Saturday night was often interesting, but finally ceased when the men folks went up to Atwell's to work.

A series of "Mothers' meetings" broke up through bickerings and want of something definite to do.

Dances were occasionally had, though they met with strenuous opposition from a few who believed dancing a sin.

Instead of the fraternal, friendly feeling hoped for, one found Kaweah divided into factions, and fractions of factions. Discussions about what Brown had to eat, and how Smith was pretending to be sick to escape work were met with, instead of an interest in literature and art. Miss Doe had been seen walking with Richard Roe and Mrs. Poe quarreled with her husband; Master Brown had been ignored at the children's party and had no chance to speak his piece, and Miss Mary's poem had been rejected by the editor of the colony paper out of the merest jealousy.

It was a huge family and everybody seemed to have the business of everybody else nearest his heart. Whenever the mail arrived all crowded around the Postmaster to see who had letters from whom and to wonder what they contained. People who had extra supplies bought with their private means brought them in closed boxes marked "furniture," and consumed them in secret for fear of adverse comment. As one said: "Why, here, they snuff the smoke that comes from my chimney to see what I had for dinner." And yet really until the past six months there has been no real lack of plain and wholesome food, and there has been no real suffering for the necessities of life.

The tendency to gossip appears to be inherent in human nature, and otherwise good people seem to take a delight in finding flaws in their neighbors. One really estimable lady wrote to the press that drunkenness prevailed at Kaweah, and when reproached with the misstatement, which arose from the drinking at a farmhouse of a glass of poor mountain wine, declared in defense that a "single drop intoxicates as much as a barrel." Scores of instances like this could be cited. Mr. Martin, the Secretary, was accused over and over again, secretly, behind his back, with having "made thousands and thousands of dollars out of commissions on the purchase of supplies." As a matter of fact the Visalia merchants always gave us, on time, to help us out, cash discounts, and these were always taken in extra supplies. But though this lie was exposed over and over again, it was continually the subject of repetition and comment. In this and a hundred similar things gossip and tittle-tattle were almost unbearable. It was kick, kick, kick, until one longed again for the large city, where one's next door neighbor is unknown.

These little pin-pricks were what killed the noble purpose and enthusiasm of the enterprise and slowly drained its life away.

Another hope of the colonists was that of educational facilities. And the opportunity existed for having the best. But removed from the restraints of the competitive world, parents and children alike were unable to distinguish between liberty and license. The schools established—common school, kindergarten, music classes, and art school—were colony enterprises, and would have succeeded had not every person had to have a finger in the pie. The teachers found it impossible to enforce discipline when a child who deemed himself aggrieved would in the class openly threaten that he would go home and get his father to call a meeting and remove the instructor. The boys and girls alike called the teachers by their first names, and came to school or not just as they pleased. Complaints made to the parents were of no avail whatever, corporal punishment of children being a “relic of barbarism.” One teacher was found objectionable because she would not permit religious songs to be sung in school, and two or three others were requested to resign for other frivolous reasons. Whenever anybody had a grievance they had only to “call a meeting” and the offensive pedagogue had to quit his desk and go back to the pick and shovel. The natural jealousy and envy of the man “who held down the soft job” came at once into play and the means were right at hand to carry out the leveling process.

I have no words except of praise for the women of Kaweah; the men did most of the gossiping, kicking, and loafing; the women were uniformly kind, cheerful, hard-working, and patient. They cooked, washed, baked, sewed, canned fruit, and on one notable occasion when the mill camp was deserted by the men, who went below “to attend a meeting,” they fought a forest fire for twenty hours and by their heroic work, attested by burned and bleeding hands and faces, saved that glorious plateau for posterity.

An accomplished landscape artist worked for months at the washtub, a graduate of three conservatories of music did the cooking for days when there was a strike in the restaurant. Every year others picked and canned hundreds of pounds of fruit for the winter on shares from adjacent ranches. Others packed shingles, kept vegetable gardens, raised chickens, and set type in the printing office. I have seen a woman getting in firewood with an ax and bucksaw in plain sight of thirteen men gathered for six solid hours around a stump excitedly discussing a rule of order improperly construed at the last meeting.

NOT ALL MISERY AND MEANNESS.

But all has not been miserable and mean at Kaweah. There have been warm and noble friendships, sweet romances, times of firm faith and courageous daring, laughter, pleasure, and weeks of perfect lovely peace. To see the crowds afield with fingers stained

with wild grapes and arms full of fragrant flowers ; to hear the merry shouts of the bathers in the warm summer water of the river ; to gather in the open air on moonlit nights and listen to the orchestra playing old, sweet tunes ; to watch the fall of some toppling pine beneath the flashing axes of our woodmen—these were joys to all of us. And did we not cheer when brave Christie rode into the foaming waters, rapidly risen, that had cut us off from the world, on his desperate ride to Visalia for aid? And were we not all proud that he was one of us when we read of Regnier's heroism on the Eureka bar? Antony Larsen, who struck the first pick on the road, young, brave giant, stricken with consumption, came back here to die and is buried beneath the pines ; and the hands that laid him in his grave were reverent and loving ones. There was, despite our meannesses, a charm as of heaven around this place, and those who went out still longed to come back and see the old scenes once again.

It is right to say also that our faults have been petty and venial ; among all here there has been no crime, no immorality, no corruption.

But it was in the conduct of its political and business life that Kaweah was more notably a failure.

In the former its purpose was in terms to put in practice the idea of social democracy, to found a collective State ruled by no class, but by the people. Officers were elected by the majority and held office until removed by the power that elected them. Meanwhile they were to be obeyed implicitly. This was the theory, but it never was nor could be put in practice, and for this reason, that no power existed to compel obedience. Every member was an equal partner, and while theoretically he was bound to obey his selected chief, practically he only did so when he pleased. His officer had no power to compel obedience, and no remedy against insubordination except his own resignation.

Every man who came here, with but few exceptions, came under the belief that his particular talents and abilities had not been properly recognized in the outside world ; that a capitalist cabal or conspiracy there existed against him, and that here in Kaweah his merits would be instantly noted, and that he would at once assume his natural position as a leader of affairs. And if such recognition were not quickly made he assumed that the "corrupt influence of capitalism" had pursued him here, and that he was still a "victim." Then he went to the General Meeting for redress, and generally got it, with power to act, until he, in turn, was pulled down through the same process by another. This General Meeting, which assembled monthly, assumed, like the Athenian popular assemblies, to deal with details, and it made confusion worse confounded. Members drew pay while attending it, and at one time it lasted four days at a stretch. Generally what one month's meeting ordered the next would rescind. Under its domination we suffered from all the evils of pop-

ular assemblages such as we read of in the books. We had not believed what we read ; now we knew they did not tell the half of it.

TOO MANY "AVERAGE" MEN.

In the outside world all of us had been mere citizens not charged with the management of affairs ; here we were the State and running the machine ourselves. The conditions were entirely novel. To have managed them successfully we should have had a good supply of Cæsars, Cromwells, and Jeffersons ; instead, we had the average man. The result was absolute anarchy tempered by occasional streaks of despotism. Of all the leaders, H. T. Taylor was the only one whose gifts fitted him at all to cope with the situation, and so long as he directed the material work it went on in a fairly successful way. When, after the road was finished, he tired of the bickering and resigned as General Superintendent, absolutely unable to longer bear the burden, the ship was rudderless and went adrift.

I remember that when objectors used to urge that at Kaweah there would be laziness, we used to answer that such was impossible because every man was an equal partner working for himself ; and of course partners would not "soldier" upon each other. But they did. Not all of them by any manner of means. But there were enough lazy men to aggravate and discourage the good ones ; and many of them used to loaf with their mouths full of phrases about "living upon the spiritual plane and loving your brother."

A ditch was surveyed and built, and then the water would not run in it ; a planing-mill foundation was dug out of solid granite where power could not be got to the machines ; trees and vines were planted out and left without water and died ; and any amount of other useless and foolish work was done, every bit of it the result of a varied, vacillating, and truly democratic system of direction. Three different book-keepers had three different systems of entry of their own, and as one succeeded the other in power the books under their control would give points to the wisest advocate of "the old corrupt capitalist system of double-entry." There was a time, too, when even the women were affected ; they cut off their skirts, made leggings of them, and called it "dress reform." But the men laughed this fad down, from jealousy, and thereafter secured the monopoly of original "progressive" ideas to themselves.

In June, 1890, a small mill was put at the end of the road, and the cutting of lumber for actual building necessities began. A total of about 20,000 feet (at \$10 per thousand) was cut during a three months' run with a mill whose capacity was 3,000 feet a day ; the actual cut averaged 193 feet per day ; less than a tenth of what ought to be done, and this mill was not run short-handed. It is true that most of the time it did not run ; that the loggers

were inexpert ; that the mill was small and old ; that picnics had to be organized ; that the men had to come down for "general meeting" ; that this foreman was bad and that foreman was worse ; that the timber was small ; that the oxen were lame, and a hundred other reasons ; but the fact remains that results were not attained as they are in the competitive world.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

At this juncture the United States Government unwisely, unjustly, and meanly stepped in, reserved the locality for a park, and arrested the Trustees for cutting timber on alleged Government land. The agents of Uncle Sam could not see the monster lumber thieves in every other canyon of the Sierras, but they could see us who in good faith were trying to do honest work upon what we believed to be ours in equity.

A long and expensive trial, ending in conviction on a technical point and continuing until May of this year, was the result. The Trustees were sentenced to fine or imprisonment and appealed, which appeal is still pending.

Although this mill was on patented land the Government tried also to interfere here, and once closed down the mill with troops. This was a persecution that they were finally forced to reconsider and the cavalry was withdrawn.

The last of June, noting the same vacillation and want of method and results as had occurred before obtaining, the Trustees issued to the resident members an imploring circular, urging the workers to more active and persistent effort at the mill and begging the non-workers to keep from picnics and other action that impeded the work. But this appeal had no permanent effect except to arouse antagonism. Work still continued in the same desultory fashion until the last of July, when Taylor was sent up to the mill. While there he discovered by a survey that the force had, with the willful carelessness of children, cut over their line on to Government land, thus again exposing the Trustees to arrest and prison, and more than this, that they had concealed from the Trustees the fact of having done so. This was more than they could bear, and all of them, except Mr. Martin, at once resigned. At the November meeting a report of the season's work at Atwell's—five months—showed that instead of cutting 2,500,000 feet, as a private enterprise with driven men would easily have done, Kaweah had cut only one-tenth of that ; instead of it being produced for \$10 a thousand or less, it had cost from \$18 to \$20, and it was sold for \$10. Comment is superfluous, and whatever excuses may be made the business failure is flat.

THE COLONY DISSOLVED.

The recommendation of the new Treasurer, A. M. White, in his final report that the facts be notified to the world and that proceedings be taken to dissolve the colony, is the proper course to follow. The enterprise is a dreary failure, and so must we conclude from its history will be any other similar attempt at present at productive co-operation. Distributive co-operation has over and over again proved a success, but productive never yet, and I think that this history shows the reason why. Under the competitive system men produce because they must work to the highest pitch or starve, and they are under competent leadership. Under the co-operative there is no such prodding incentive to toil, no probability of such leadership, and men are not yet civilized enough to do right for right's sake alone and to labor for the love of production itself.

A few more than half of the resident members at the November meeting abolished the time checks, took possession of the machinery and land of the colony, repudiated the credits of the old workers, and decided to continue the struggle as a small enterprise under the absolute power of one man. They hope to make a living here as small farmers thus co-operating. Whether this plan succeeds or not cuts no figure whatever with this history. We can leave them quarreling over the little property left, as we leave coyotes quarreling over a corpse.

One duty only remains to those whose hearts were with Kaweah as a co-operative experiment: it is, to let the truth be known.

And is there no remedy, then, for the evils that oppress the poor? And is there no surety that the day is coming when justice and right shall reign on earth? I do not know; but I believe, and I hope, and I trust.

BURNETTE G. HASKELL.

Kaweah, November, 1891.

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